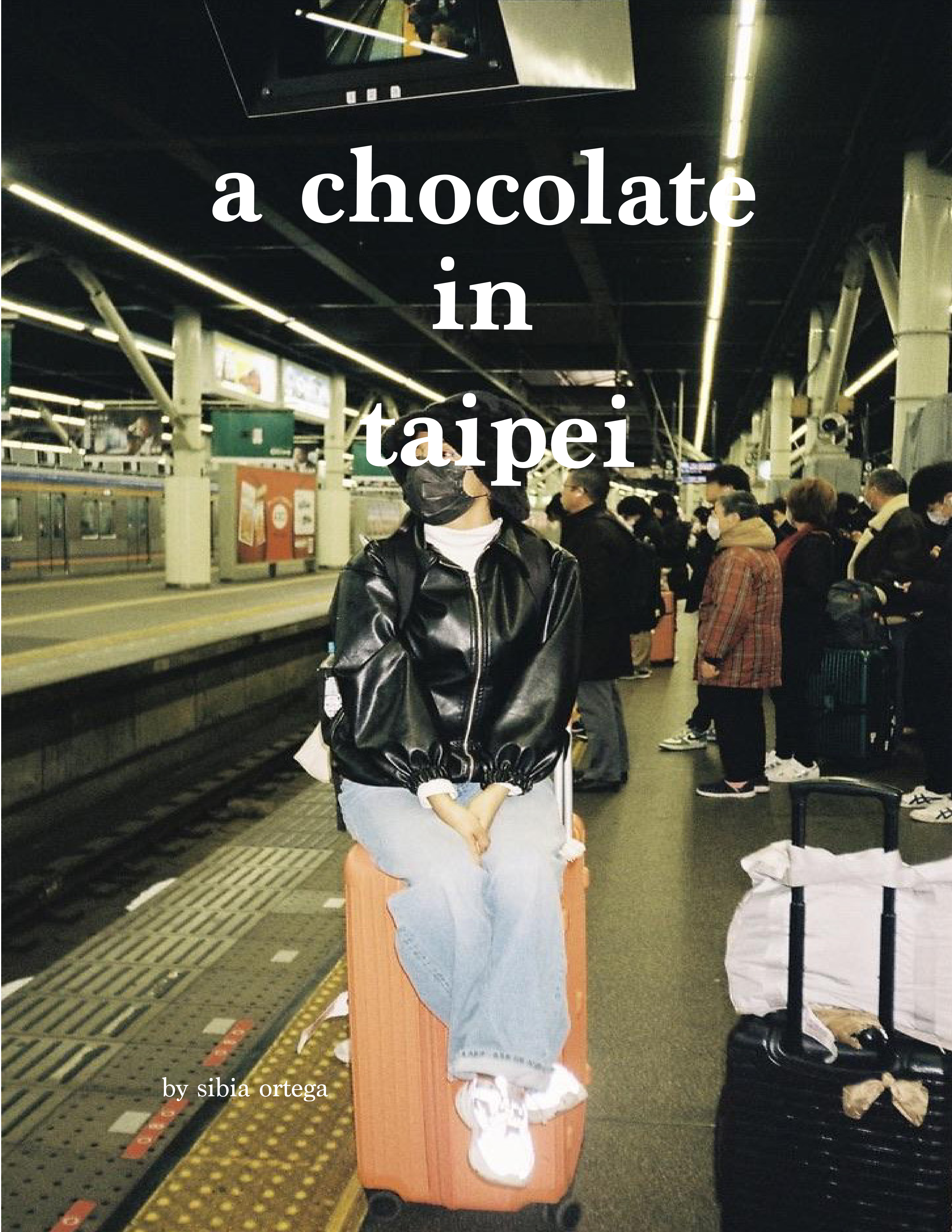


a chocolate in taipei

by sibia ortega

- a chocolate in taipei
- becoming chocolate
- running for before six
- from chaos to order
- a menu of memories
- google translate and me
- a pay day in taipei
- how my roomates changed me

I remember her writing in small notebooks, the ones she would fill using the leftover pages from our school books that were never completely used. I don’t remember exactly when she found the time during her busy days, but I can imagine she probably wrote at night, when everyone was asleep and she finally had a moment for herself. I picture her with a cup of hot tea, sitting at the kitchen table, writing and writing.

I saw her notes a few times, but I never read them deeply because I knew it was her personal space, a place where she loved to write, mostly about passages she read in the Bible or stories from when she was younger. Her writing was pure and simple, yet full of beautiful and elevating phrasing in Spanish.

I once asked her why she liked to write. Her answer was, “Because I do not want to forget my childhood memories, and maybe one day I can share them with others.” I found it inspirational, but at the time, I didn’t fully understand the meaning behind her words.

Now, as I have found my own way of expressing myself throåugh journalism, I chose writing because I finally understand what she meant. I may not always be the best at telling stories out loud, but I can tell them through writing stories.

This book is dedicated to my mom.

preface

This book is a beautiful reflection that the author will carry with her forever. As a reader, you are invited to be part of a journey that feels both personal and relatable. I believe that anyone who travels to Taiwan, especially those coming from Guatemala, will find something meaningful in these pages. As you read, you will notice how the writer shares her experiences from Chimaltenango to her life now in Taiwan. Through small but meaningful details, like horchata, a traditional Guatemalan drink, she connects memory, culture, and identity in a very genuine way. These moments feel honest and close, making the story easy to connect with.

The book reflects on identity and invites you to question and observe, both through the writing and the photographs. It is filled with reflection and emotion. I would recommend taking your time while reading it, so you can really take in each part.

One of the most meaningful sections is “From Chaos to Order.” It stands out because of its message and symbolism. The comparisons with Guatemala feel very real, and as someone with a similar background, I saw myself reflected in many of the experiences. Coming from Guatemala and going to the other side of the world can make you question things, like why people look at you, and later understand that it often comes from curiosity about who you are and where you come from. Throughout the book, you can see how the author’s perspective changes over time. It shows growth, openness, and adaptation. At the same time, it reflects how these experiences have encouraged her to begin a new chapter in her life.

I am very proud of her work, and I believe this project is a beautiful way to close her chapter at Ming Chuan University. I am excited to see what comes next for her.

Love, Camila Sáenz

author´s note on methodology

This e-book is elaborated as an Autoethnography, a qualitative research approach that connects personal experience with cultural analysis.

Autoethnography is a research method based on personal experience to illustrate cultural texts, experiences, opinions and practices. I believe that personal experience is imbued with cultural rules and expectations, and they engage in meticulous self-reflection. In order to identify and examine between self and social life, I aim to show readers in the process of understanding what to do, how to live, and the meaning of my struggles while living abroad in Taiwan as an international student. In this sense, my adventures of moving from Guatemala to Taiwan, delving into identity, language and belonging, become both personal memories and cultural testimony. Through the wider work of Chang (2008) and Ellis, Adams and Bochner (2011), this digital work reflects how individual stories can reveal wider patterns of migration, adaptation, and intercultural communication.

chapter 1

a chocolate in taipei

This chapter introduces my experience of leaving Guatemala and arriving in Taiwan for the first time. Through personal memories and cultural comparison, it reflects on how migration reshapes identity, belonging, and self-perception.

Hello, I want to start by telling you a little bit about myself. First, I want to refer to myself as Chahima! My friends like to play with my name, and this one feels fun to me. Also, my grandmother from my mother's side used to call me this, and I remember her with so much love. I am from Guatemala and I have two sisters. I am the middle one. My parents are still together and live a quiet life in Guatemala along with my younger sister. My older sister lives in Czequia and has her own life there.

Guatemala! Every time people ask me about it I need to use Mexico as a reference. They will be like ¨Oh, Mexico¨ and I will answer ¨No, no. Below Mexico¨. I am always prepared for this question. Guatemala is located in Central America. It is such a perfect escape for a lovely break. Oh! Another answer when people asked me about it is ¨Coffee¨ yes! Guatemala is in the top 5 coffee exporters to Taiwan.

Honestly it is not hard to love it. Now, after living 4 years in Taiwan, I finally realized we have the perfect weather there. It is not too hot, not too cold, no humidity! and it remains like that the entire year. People are welcoming, hardworking, charming, talkative, kind and value family. The reason I decided to leave it was because I was looking for a better opportunity.

Why did I decide to make a book and tell you a little about the things I have learned during my stay in Taiwan? Well, because I clearly love traveling! My answer is always clear when people ask me: Where did you get your love for traveling and exploring so much? Well, from my parents. My dad was an adventurer who used to climb volcanoes in Guatemala, and my mom? Well, when she received a job opportunity to travel to Norway during the winter, she didn't hesitate. She packed, geared up, and went without fear. She was fearless.

Here I see the adventure spirit and curiosity that both of my parents passed down to me, and I love it. Reflecting a little on the trips I have had the chance to make, I decided to write about Taiwan. It was the first country I traveled to outside of Guatemala. Yes, you read that right. During my first 24 years, I had never left home and the first challenge I faced was the idea of letting go of the closeness I had always known with my family.

In Guatemala, it is culturally accepted, and even expected, to stay close to your family. You go to school, and then, if you have the economic possibility, you can go to a university, which pretty much resembles a dating agency these days. After you graduate, most likely you will get married and live near your family. This ideally happens in middle-class families. My family is what based on Guatemalan standards define as lower middle class. My dad is a snack seller and my mom a Secretary. Both of them could not afford university but had to work since they were children.

I won a scholarship to study in Taiwan, and I was so excited to see a world I never knew. I thought the hardest part was physically being separated from my family, however, the hardest part became the moment I stepped into Taoyuan International Airport. The real adjustment began the moment I finally saw this new place. All the stories from friends, YouTube videos I saw on the internet about Taipei would slowly change the way I understood my own body, my identity and how others perceived me.

My adventurer parents. March 1993, ¨Volcán de Agua, Guatemala¨

chapter 2

becoming the chocolate

This chapter explores how cultural difference and racial perception influenced the way I understood myself after arriving in Taiwan. Throughout the loupe of Identity Negotiation Theory (Ting-Toomey,1993), it reflects on how identity changes through intercultural interaction and the stare of others.

I come from a country where more than half of the population has brown skin. I mean, we eat black beans and drink coffee every single day. So, I used to think that I was a pretty "average" girl. At least, that's what I believed…until I left my country.

From the moment I landed in Taiwan, I realized I looked like a chocolate compared to the locals. Pale skin, slanted eyes, straight black hair. Obviously, they were going to notice my existence. For me, it was quite hard to get on a bus and notice that most of the passengers were staring at me. Back then, I used to be very introverted. I would immediately look down.

Most of the situations where people were looking at me were on the bus and the Subway. Maybe because we are all sitting so close and facing each other in such a small space. I do not bite, and yet people clearly avoided sitting next to me on public transportation. I must admit, it used to make me feel nervous when they were staring at me for no specific reason but maybe they were cautious about where I was from. However, I felt a slight D-I-S-C-R-I-M-I-N-A-T-E-D. It didn't help much with my self-esteem in the beginning either.

But that only lasted a week. Ha! I decided I wasn't going to see it that way anymore. Maybe people looked at me because they were simply curious about my appearance. Of course, a Latina girl with different features and big eyes, they allowed me to lift my gaze and look at them back kindly. My perspective was different. The nicest part is when people come closer and ask about where you are from. Taiwanese people arekind and curious. Everywhere I go, people ask me in English: "Where are you from?" Then I understood that it wasn't discrimination, it was curiosity.

Experiences like these made me reflect on the idea of identity negotiation, a concept discussed by Stella Ting-Toomey that explores how people shape and reshape their identities when interacting with others from different cultures. Ting-Toomey describes identity as the way people see themselves and present who they are during interaction with others, especially within a cultural context. In other words, identity is something people constantly negotiate as they figure out ¨who is who¨ in their relationships. Once these agreements are made, people are expected to stay true to the identities they have chosen to present.

Identity is not something fixed. Instead, it is something that shifts and evolves as people interact with one another. In intercultural situations, people are constantly adjusting how they present themselves while also interpreting how others see them.

This idea deeply resonates with my experience because I went from feeling excluded to redefining the way I saw myself, from the ideas: I am being discriminated against to I am unique, and people are simply curious. In many ways, that was identity negotiation in action.

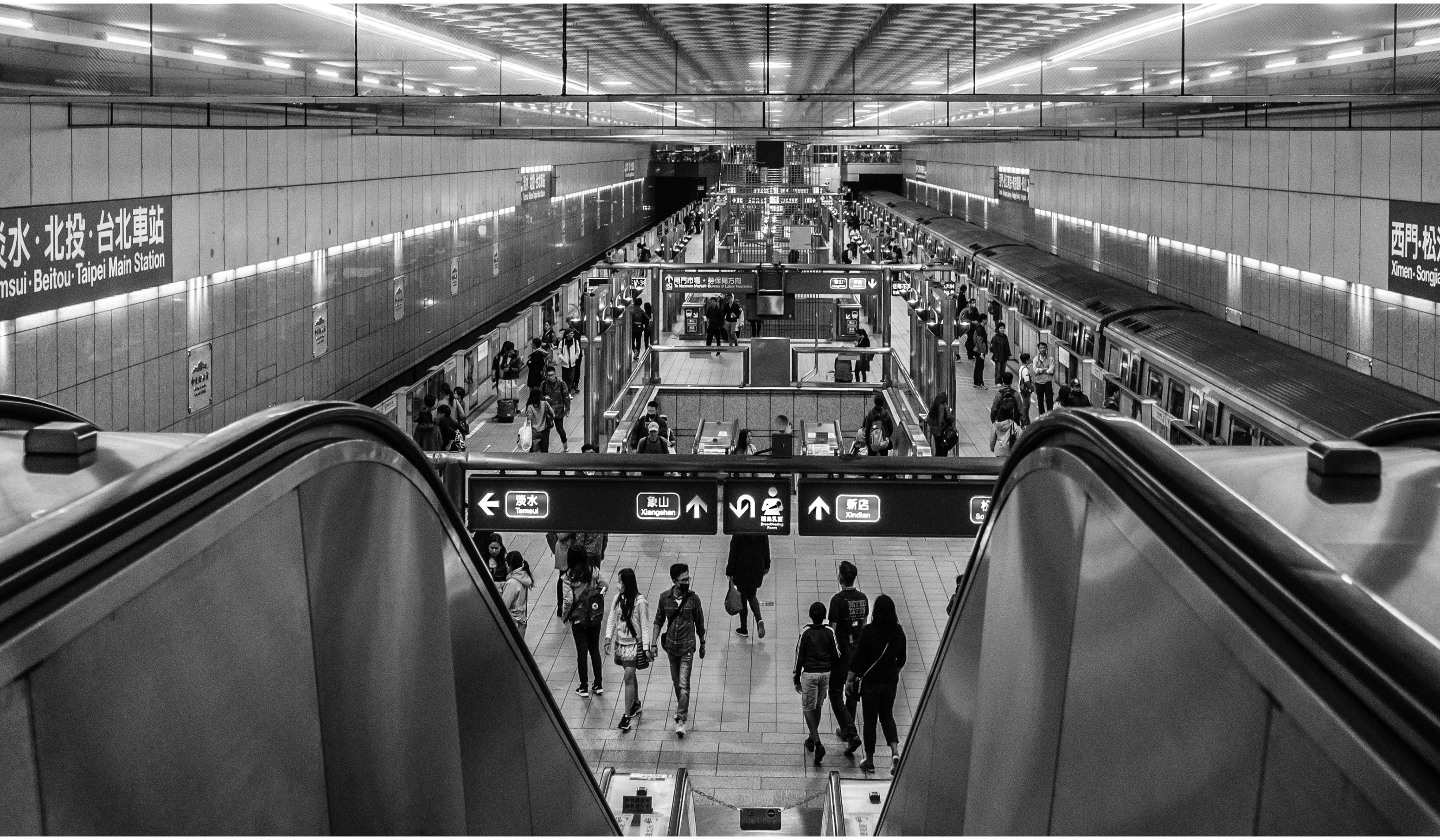
Another moment that connects to this theory happened one day on my way to work. I was sitting in the back of the bus, which was unusually empty. I usually took the 711 bus because it dropped me right in front of my workplace, and the whole ride took about an hour. At that time I was working at ¨Taj Indian Restaurant,¨ located in Da´an District.

I was sitting in the back of the bus, which was unusually empty. I usually took the 711 bus because it dropped me right in front of my workplace, and the whole ride took about an hour. At that time I was working at ¨Taj Indian Restaurant,¨ located in Da´an District.

That day, I felt someone staring at me from across the aisle. Suddenly, a man leaned slightly toward me and said, “Namaste,” with a small nod. Without thinking, I replied the same way, even while my mind was asking, What is going on?

I mean, I usually wear earphones in the meantime so I basically will be in my own world but still aware. “Which part of India are you from? I’m from Mumbai,” he said. I looked back at him a bit shocked and replied: ¨pardon¨. ¨What are you doing here in Taiwan, are you alone in Taiwan? What do you do,¨ he asked. I was completely following the conversation, kinda confused about it. He looked like he was in his late fifties. We spent most of the ride talking about his life in Taipei, though I mostly listened. He was excited to share his stories and small adventures in the city. He told me about how surprised he was after realizing all the years he has been in Taiwan working. 26 years! Living with his wife in Taipei. That is insane, I told him. But he told me he was not alone but most of his family and friends immigrated at the same time.

As I was about to get off the bus, I told him I was from Guatemala. “Oh, that makes sense. I thought it was strange that you were speaking to me in English,” he said with a big smile.


淡水・北投・台北車站
msui・Beitou・Taipei Main Station
西門・松
Ximen・Songji
淡水
Tamsui
象山
Xiangshan
新店
Xindian

MRT Beitou station, Beitou District, Taipei City.

chapter 3
running for before six

This chapter reflects on different meanings of safety, family, and community in Guatemala and Taiwan. Applying the concept of collectivism within intercultural communication theory, it looks into how cultural environments shape emotional security and everyday behavior. Through memories of family and public spaces, I compare two different ways of experiencing protection and belonging.

The idea of collectivism refers to societies where people see themselves primarily as part of a group rather than as mere individuals. It is part of the broader cross-cultural theory, which studies how people from different cultural backgrounds behave and interact. In collectivist cultures, individuals are often born into strong, close-knit communities, usually extended families, that emphasize loyalty, interdependence, and mutual support. Guatemala represents a collectivist culture: families are very close, people rely on one another within their communities, and safety is often seen as a shared responsibility rather than a personal one.

Maybe that's why darkness always felt heavier back home. In Guatemala, being alone after sunset meant being unprotected, I remember how walking home after six in the evening felt like racing against time.

I come from a small city of about 90,000 people. One hour away from the capital in my country. It is called Chimaltenango, but we call it Chimal. It is quite commercial and noisy if you are in the center. I live 15 minutes away from the center, where it is calmer, but my neighborhood is still noisy, typical in Guatemala. The houses are usually small, made of concrete, and the roofs vary between metal sheets and concrete. My house has both. Small but cozy.

If I want to take a bus, I need to go out and wait until one passes. Many times, I had to run after it. They only accept cash, which is very important to know, if you don't want to be left stranded. These are our public transportation, chicken buses.

They are second-hand buses brought from the United States, colorful and large, and they serve as the main form of public transportation in my country, running long-distance routes that connect small towns with big cities. We call them ¨camionetas¨ in Spanish. Few people use bicycles because the roads are not suitable, there are no bike lanes, and drivers can hit you because, well, there is not such an order in traffic mostly in all the country. On top of that, your bike can easily get stolen. My city is even dangerous if you are young and a woman. You cannot walk alone before 8 a.m. or after 5 p.m. in lonely areas plus there are not many public lights as well.

I remember always running home before 5 pm. It was a 15 min walk from the bus stop to my home. If I could not make it on time. I should take the bus but not walk. My family taught me to never walk alone after that time. So, I have to take any chicken bus available. But not everything is bad. There is beauty behind the chaos, too. Chimaltenango is surrounded by three beautiful volcanoes: Fuego, Agua, and Pacaya, the three most touristic volcanoes in Guatemala. They rise right in the center of the landscape.

With my family, we enjoyed doing weekly hikings in order to relax and spend some time together after a busy week. We started near ¨El Chipoton¨ which is an aldea located in El Tejar, Chimaltenango and walked around 22km until we reached ¨El Libramiento¨ which is located in Sumpango, Chimaltenango.

It is a walking path through nature where at the end, you can fully admire the three volcanos I mentioned earlier. When I think about those hikes, I realize I never felt afraidor unsafe. I knew I was protected, because we were together as a family. There was always company and I think that was my favorite part of it.

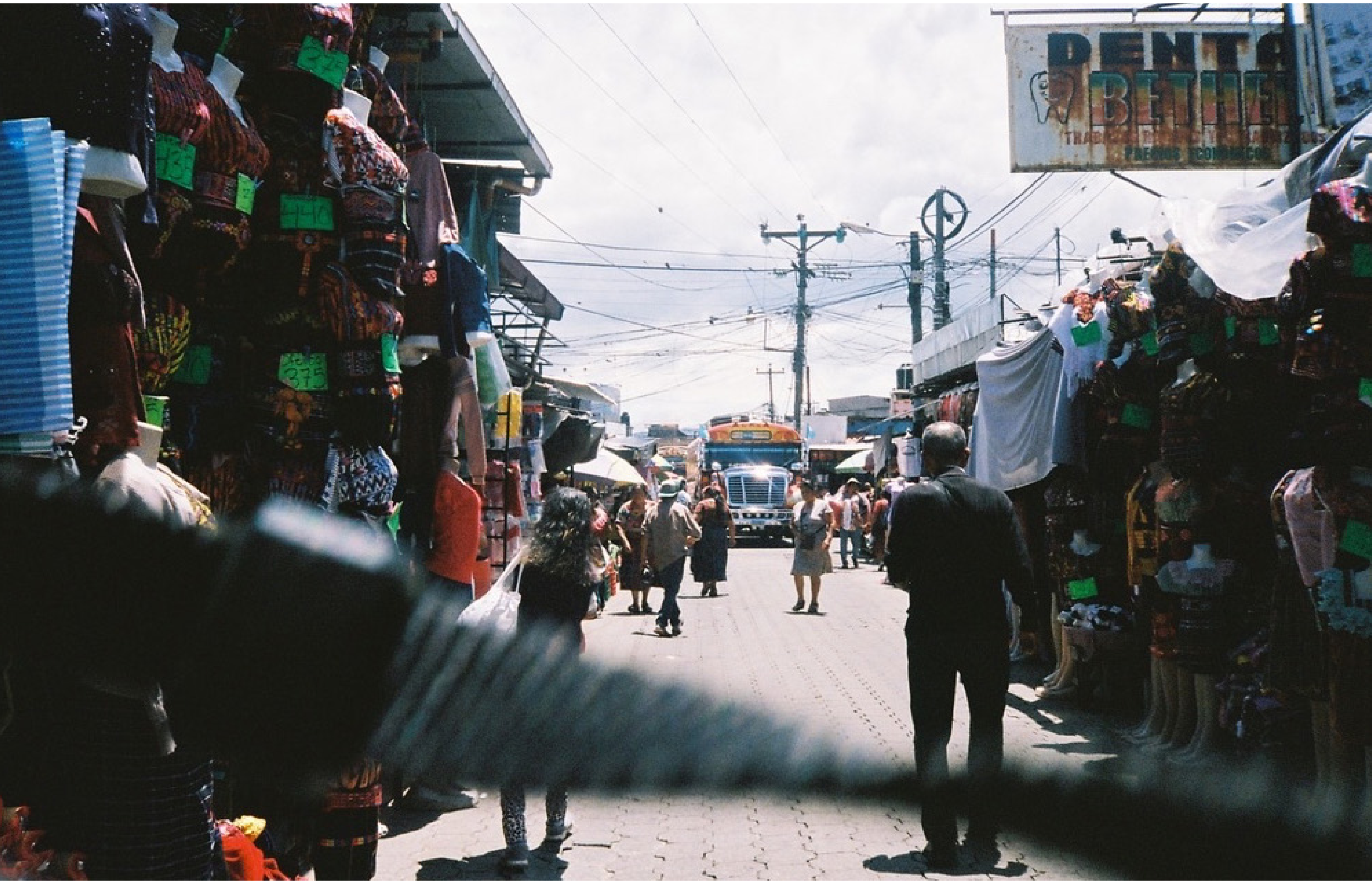
Once again, collectivism was there, not as a theory, but as something we lived.

We will meet at my mom's niece's house every Saturday evening. Then, whoever is free to join, is welcome to go hiking with us. We used to start by walking slowly around the principal streets while on our way to the mountain near where they live.

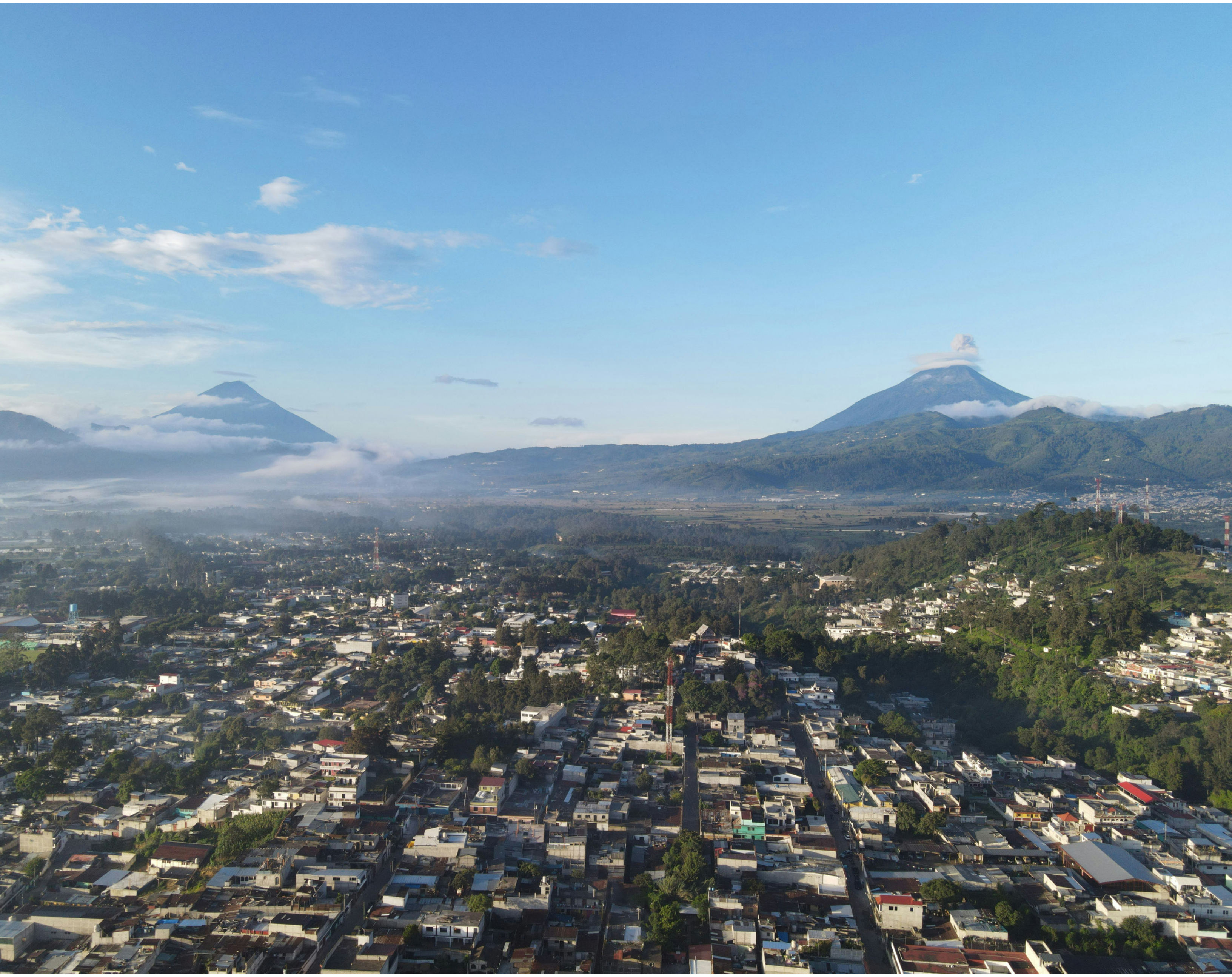
My favorite part was all the quiet and peaceful space while walking. It was a 5-6 hour hike. It was a precious space of time aside from everybody's busy routines. Sharing our week's activities and asking each other how we are doing.

I remember I liked to be walking next to one of my female cousins, she is the kind of person that you are going to have a genuine conversation with. She will be a good listener but also a good talker and adviser.

When we talk about family we think about our blood family but in most Latin American countries, family could be a close friend, your charming neighbor, your co-worker, anybody could be thanks to the strong bonds created after a simple conversation, again, collectivism.


DENTAL
BETHEL
PRECIOS ECONOMICOS

¨Chicken Bus behind Chimaltenango Market, Guatemala¨



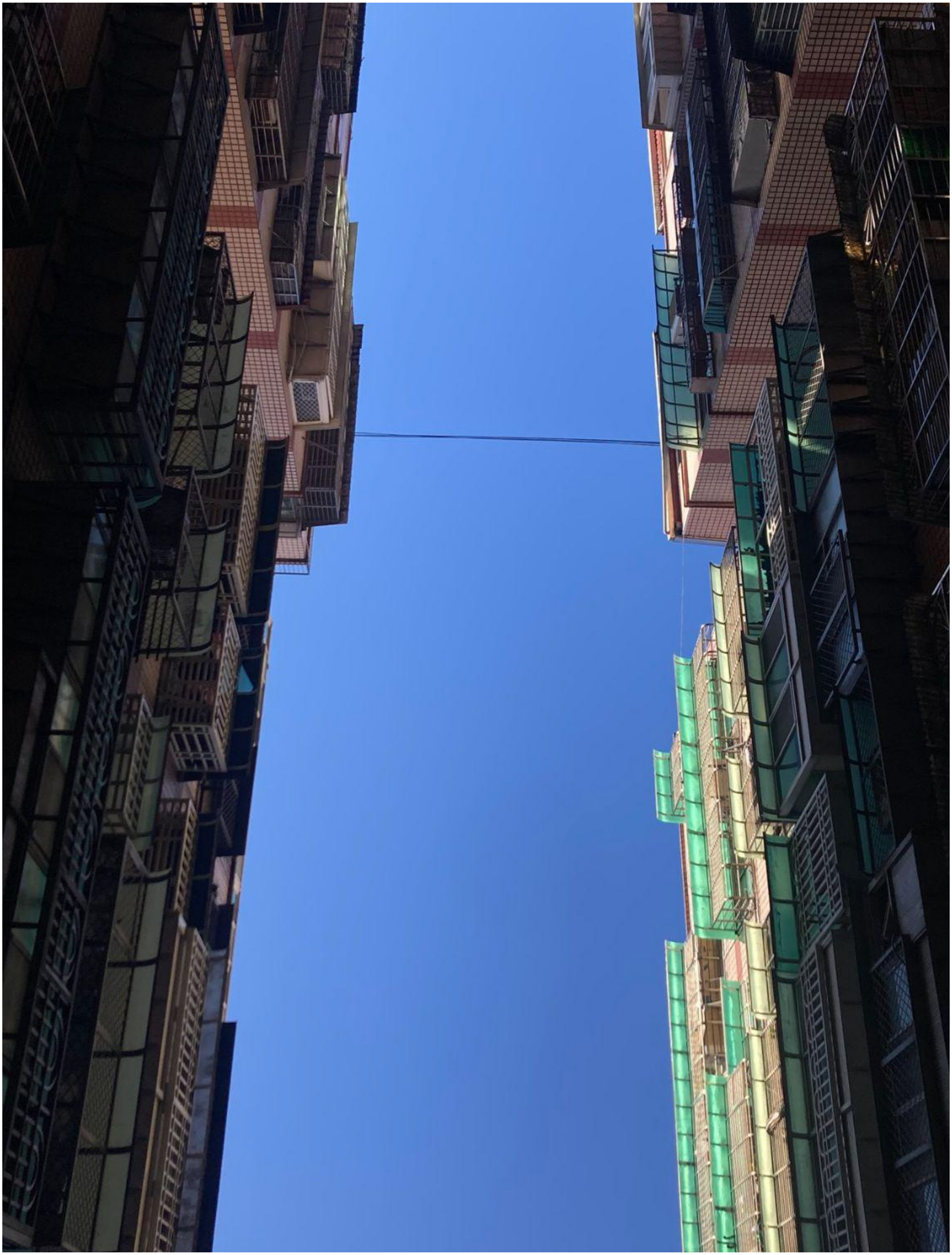
Fire, Water and Acatenango Volcano. Chimaltenango, Guatemala.

On the other hand, Taiwan also places a strong value on community and social harmony. However, the difference lies in how that sense of safety is built. In my experience, security in Taiwan comes from structure through organization, public rules, and respect for other people´s space. It feels like a collective system based more on social responsibility than on emotional closeness. Experiencing this was like discovering a completely different version of something I had always known.

This contrast made me question what safety means. Back home, feeling safe meant being surrounded by people I trust. In Taipei, however, safety shows in a different way. It is one of the safest cities in the world, with a very low violent crime rate and a twenty-four-hour urban environment. I often found myself walking around at three in the morning because I wanted a snack, go biking, run, or simply just walk. It is simply a different kind of safety.

Moving here was, of course, a drastic cultural change for me. I looked at the buildings, the houses, the streets, they were all so different from home. A place where the lights were still on everywhere after 7p.m. made me excited to go out. I could not stop telling my family how much I enjoyed it. Everything felt new and fascinating, the kind of excitement people often experience when first arriving in a completely different culture. The majority of locals live in apartments built very close to one another. When you step onto a small balcony, you often see clothes hanging outside, especially in the summer, because the humidity in Taiwan is so intense that even your clothes get dried in less than 3 hours. Every apartment has an air-conditioning unit attached to the balcony. That surprised me a lot! I never in my life thought I would be using AC because of the forceof the weather. I also remember seeing people leaving their belongings outside or even leaving their doors open. For example, bicycles. Back home, you would never see a bike left alone in front of a house, someone would steal it almost immediately.

Riverside Park, Tamsui, Taiwan. biking at 3 am.



Apartment complex, Sichuan Rd, Banqiao District, Taiwan.

I have been able to understand how happy and safe living in Taipei makes me feel. I visited Guatemala two years later. I felt overwhelmed and frustrated because I was missing the convenient, modern life I was having in a developed Asian country.

Experiences like this are often described as reverse culture shock, a phenomenon where returning home feels unexpectedly difficult after adapting to life in another culture.

chapter 4

from chaos to order

This chapter explores how transportation system reflect deeper cultural values and social organization. Throughout personal events commuting in both Guatemala and Taiwan, it journeys through how structure, efficiency, and public order shape everyday life. The chapter also reflects on the emotional impact of adapting to a more organized urban environment.

In my experience, Taiwan has one of the best public transportation systems in the world. Efficient, punctual, and affordable compared to Thailand, Vietnam and Japan, I had the opportunity to visit shortly. Proper public transportation is a privilege that not every country has. It becomes an important basic need, one that we do not have in my country.

Guatemala has a cross-cutting traffic problem that affects locals. However, it does not seem to concern the government, since the issue is complex and not easy to solve. Over the last ten years, the number of vehicles in the country has risen from approximately 3.2 to 6.2 million, which means even more traffic. There have been many proposals to reduce it, such as building more highways and even a surface train. The reality is that most of these projects' budgets end up going to corrupt construction companies, and many of them remain "under construction."

Yes, there is public transportation in Guatemala, but it is chaotic and not safe. If you want to go to the city, the only option is the chicken buses. You have to memorize their schedule because there is no board or app to tell you when one will arrive. But it does come…eventually. The bus is designed to carry around 48 adults or up to 72 children, yet they often carry more than 70 adults. Everyone is squeezed together, many people standing, which makes the bus shake from side to side at every curve. For many tourists, it is such a fun experience but for a local who has been commuting like this for 15 years in order to reach work, is tedious, my mom's case. Guatemala is full of mountains, with endless curves on every road. On top of that, at every stop there is therisk of a thief getting on, or street vendors pushing their products into your hands, expecting you to buy them.

In Taipei, you just check your phone, and the bus will be there. The train will be there. You simply swipe your EasyCard, and you don't need to carry cash. The transportation system is so advanced that it even includes bike lanes.

In Guatemala, I never used a bicycle as transportation. The only bike lane ever attempted is right next to a highway, separated by only a small painted line, with cars and trucks passing dangerously close, as if they could hit you at any moment. I remember riding my bike all over Taipei so many times I can't even count anymore. I would go out at midnight and come back to my dorm at three or four in the morning. Along the way, I met locals and had small conversations while biking.

I loved exploring on the yellow "U-bikes," as they are called in Taiwan. Even today, I still use them to go wherever I need, including to work.

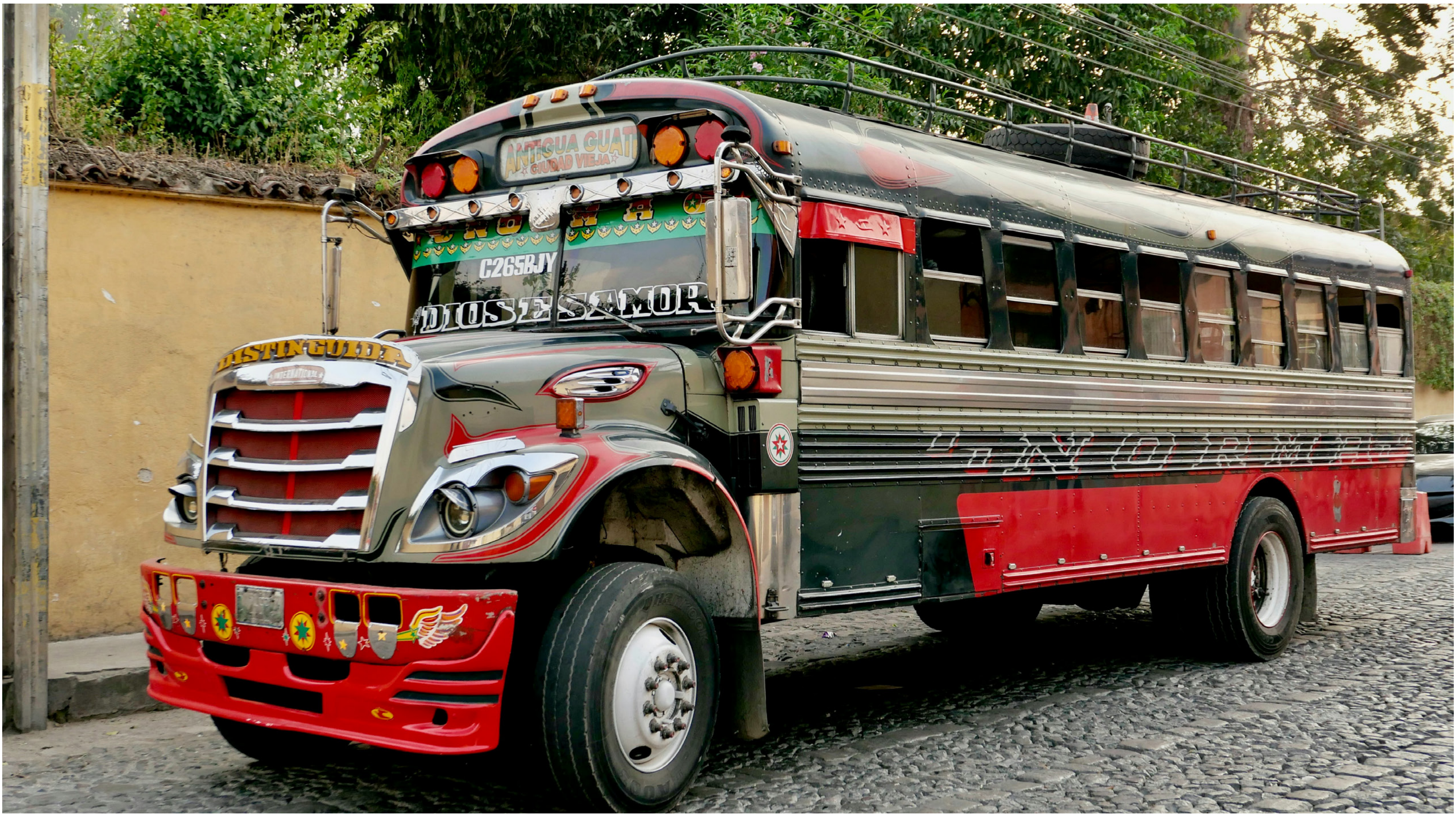
U-bikes, I really hope this transportation system could work in my country one day. It is such a convenient way to get around. In Taipei, there is almost a U-bike station every two or three blocks, at least from what I have observed. They are everywhere, almost like 7-Eleven stores. All you need to do is go to a convenience store, buy an EasyCard, add some money, download the app, and connect your card. Ready to go.

As a privilege, the first 30 minutes are free, which is honestly insane. I love it. I remember one time I spent more than 400 NTD on a single ride. It was during my first winter break. I was feeling homesick, and exploring made me feel better. A friend toldme about Houdong Cat Village, located in Ruifang District. I checked the map the day before and saw it was two hours away. I told myself, "adventure time."

So I started biking from Shilin MRT station. It was around 42 kilometers, absolutely amazing. One of the most breathtaking and unforgettable experiences of my life. I faced many challenges along the way, but the fact that I could ride a U-bike all the way there, and even find a U-bike station right in front of the village to park it, made it even better. (That's when I realized I actually had to return the bike at some point, otherwise I would have to take it back on the train. What a relief). In the end, I spent all that money because it took me about nine hours to get there. I made many stops, talking to locals, enjoying the view, running out of phone charge, eating snacks, going to the restroom, and getting lost more times than I can count.

I did the same journey again during this 2026 winter break, but this time starting from my dorm in Sanchong. It was 47 kilometers, and it took me around four hours to complete. I wanted to experience it one more time. Still incredible.

I feel free every time I ride a bike here. The streets are well marked, safe, and respected. And what fascinates me the most is that Taiwan has one of the largest bike path systems in the world, making it one of the most bike-friendly places I have ever experienced.


ANTIGUA GUATE
CIUDAD VIEJA
C265BJY
DIOS ES AMOR
DISTINGUIDA

Chicken Bus, Antigua Guatemala.

On my way biking to Ruifang District, Taiwan.

chapter 5

a menu of memories

This chapter explores food as a space of memory, identity, and cultural adaptation. Throughout an intercultural communicaton eyeglass, it reflects on how everyday meals become emotional bridges between cultures. By sharing stories with Guatemalan and Taiwanese cuisine. The chapter evaluates how belonging can be created through taste, routine, and shared moments.

One of the things that helps me understand a new culture is food. It reveals identity and the history behind every dish. It feels like memory, comfort, and often the only thing that fits in my suitcase from home. But ever since I moved to Taiwan, I've learned that food is also a language, a language that can bring belonging, misunderstanding, and adaptation.

I started to notice that cultural encounters don't happen in big, dramatic moments. They happen in small, everyday spaces, like the table. Every table I've sat at became a meeting point, a place where Guatemala and Taiwan sat together. Sometimes they clashed, sometimes they understood each other, but they always spoke through flavor.

What really shapes our sense of belonging isn't just where we are, but what we do and feel in those places. At the beginning, everything felt unfamiliar. But slowly, through cooking, tasting, and sharing food, things started to change. What once felt distant became part of my routine. Each day brought something new, and with it, a little more comfort in a place that once felt unknown.

Taiwan's sweet-and-salty flavors were not my favorites at the beginning. I wasn't used to them.

In Guatemala, flavors are fresh, salty since we use different sauces in our food. Our cuisine is full of stews and broths, with beans and corn as essentials. Tropical fruits are everywhere. In Taiwan, though, I discovered something different. Because of its history,sugar and salt are often combined in a way that highlights sweetness. It was new to me, but also surprisingly interesting.

I still remember opening my suitcase after arriving in Taiwan. It was full of snacks, but most importantly, beans. They are an essential part of every Guatemalan dish. You find them everywhere. Markets, Supermarkets, small stores we called them¨tienditas¨. They're simple, full of protein, and for me, they mean comfort. It is my favorite legume.One afternoon in the dorm, my friends and I were all missing home. That's when I remembered the beans I have in my backpack from months ago, but still good. I cooked them the way my mom always does: beans, onion, a whole head of garlic, and salt. That was it. The smell filled the room, and suddenly, everything felt different. That night, home didn't feel so far away.

I realized then that home is not always a place you can point to on a map. Sometimes, it's something you create in a moment. That small pot of beans became home, right there and then. It was enough.

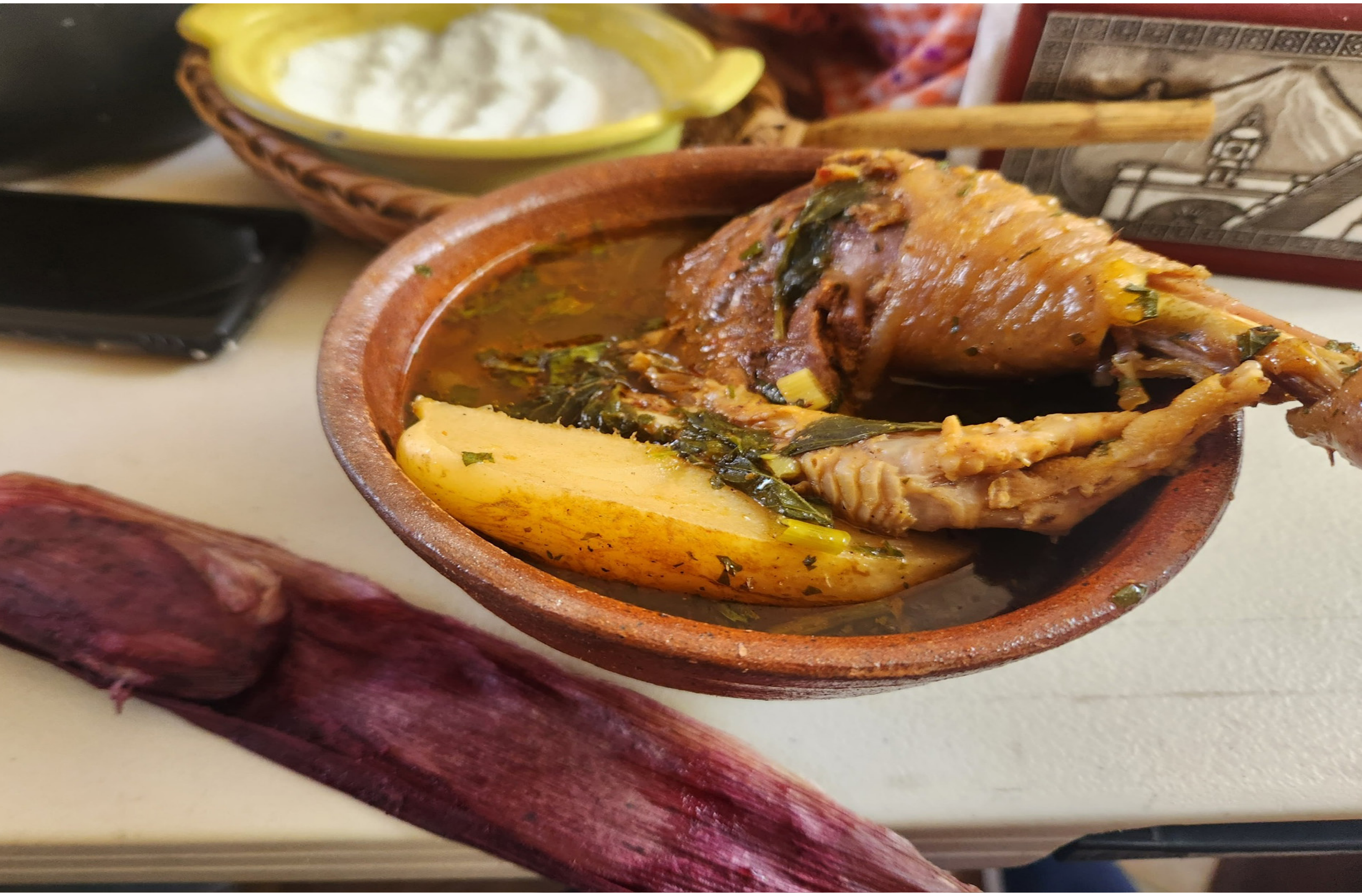
Then came hot pot.

Hot Pot is a popular dish in Taiwan, where everyone gathers around a table and cooks together in a shared pot. Vegetables, meat, seafood, tofu with a dipping sauce defined by a savoury, umami and a slightly spicy chinese condiment called ¨Sacha Sauce¨ all of them mixed together, everything goes in. It's not just about eating, it's about sharing theexperience of preparing your food while sharing your day to day activities with your friends or family.

The first time I tried it, I immediately thought of caldos we do back in Guatemala. The idea felt familiar, even if the details were different. Back home, everything is prepared before it reaches the table, and we don’t usually include seafood or noodles. But still, something about it felt the same. Eating together as a family while sharing our day with everyone.

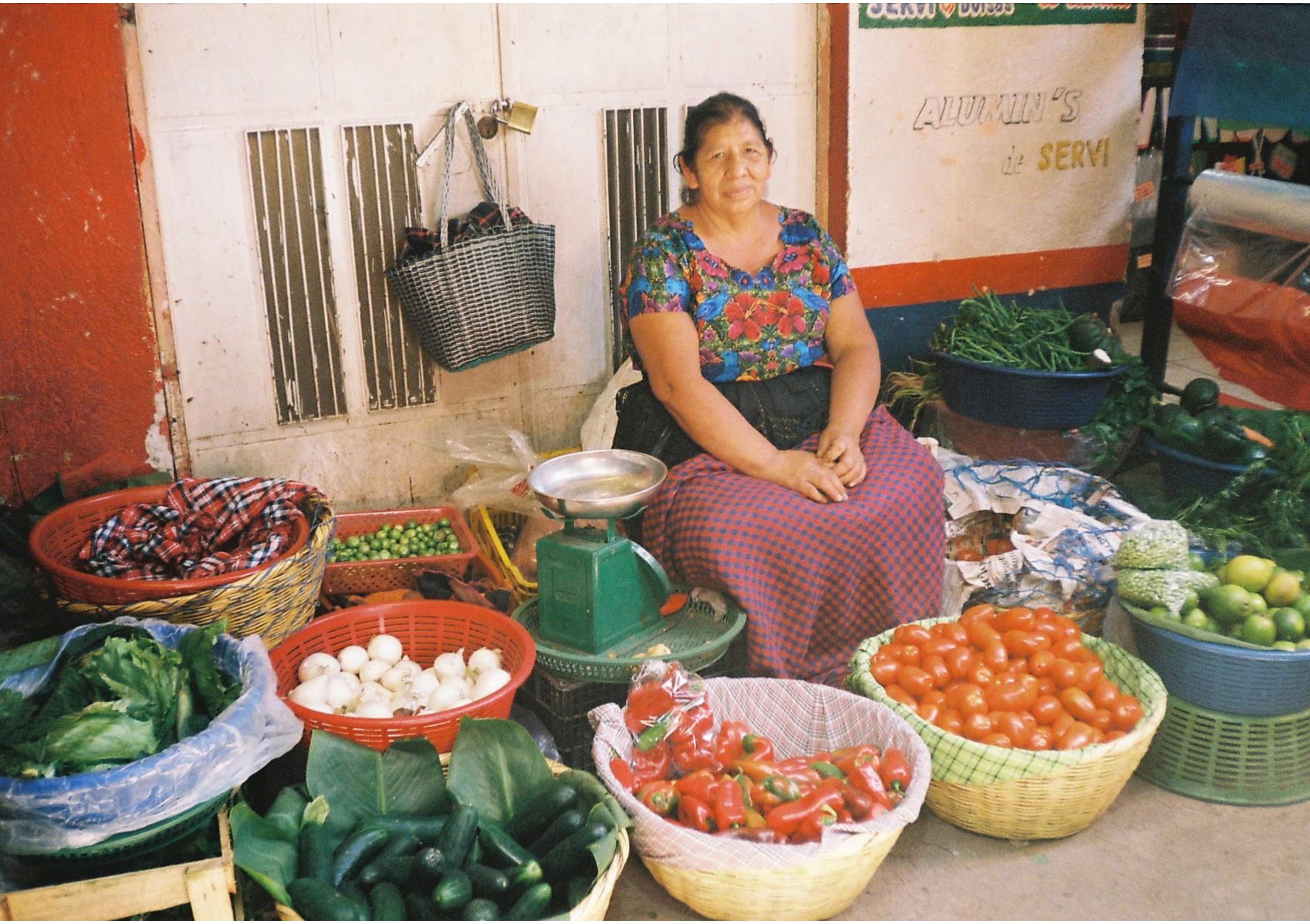
I remember sitting there, cooking my food piece by piece, and feeling this unexpected sense of comfort. The flavors were different, but the warmth, the act of sharing, felt like home.

Maybe comfort doesn’t come from the ingredients themselves, but from the feeling they create, the people you shared it with, the experience created. That moment, sitting around a hot pot table, was where my two worlds met. Not perfectly, not identically, but in a way that made sense to me.



Guatemalan Caldo.

Antigua Guatemala Central Market.


ALUMIN'S
de SERVI

Market seller ¨marchantita¨, la terminal market, Chimaltenango.

During my first year of university, I wanted to share a piece of my culture with my classmates. I thought about horchata, a traditional drink from Guatemala made with rice, ground pumpkin seeds, milk, sugar, and cinnamon. It’s cold, refreshing, and perfect for a hot day. It´s something I grew up with.

I didn’t bring rice with me because I assumed Taiwan would have plenty, and it did. But when I went to the supermarket, I was overwhelmed. There were so many types of rice, more than I had ever seen in my life. Different shapes, textures, purposes. I just picked one that looked right and hoped for the best, I had no clue about each of them.

The next day, I brought the horchata to class and started offering it to everyone. Some people loved it. Others were unsure. One of my classmates even said it tasted like a milkshake. The Latinas, of course, were excited. My secret? I used sushi rice. No one knew but me, and honestly, it changed the flavor. It wasn’t quite the horchata I knew. Something felt off. But at the same time, it made me realize something important. Food travels, just like we do. It changes, adapts, and carries stories with it. Even when it’s not perfect, it still connects us to where we come from. And sometimes, in that process, we create something new.

That’s what it means to live between places. Not fully here, not fully there, but somewhere in between, building bridges through small, everyday things, cuisine.

Food became my way of understanding the world. Every dish I tried, every recipe I shared, felt like a quiet conversation between cultures. No words, just taste.

And through that, I learned something simple but important: belonging is not about geography. It’s about connection. A spoon of beans, a bowl of hot pot, a glass of horchata, they all carry the same feeling.

Somewhere between the sweet and the salty, between Taiwan and Guatemala, I found the flavor of home.

chapter 6

google translate and me

This chapter reflects on the challenges of communicating across languages and cultures while living and working in Taiwan. Through experiences in classrooms and everyday interactions, it explores how misunderstandings can also create opportunities for connection. Applying intercultural communication theory, the chapter explains how language becomes both a barrier and a bridge.

I took two semesters of Mandarin as part of my university curriculum. Before that, I had never taken a single Mandarin class. It was quite difficult for me.

I've always believed there's no subject as challenging for me as learning a new language. The problem is not the language, not the grammar, not the teacher, it is my bad memory. I remember our teacher, Alan, was very calm, and his classes always felt peaceful.

There's one particular thing I'll never forget. In Mandarin, when you want to refer to your teacher, you call them lǎoshī, which literally means "teacher." Now, I spent two whole semesters calling my teacher lǎoshǔ, which literally means "rat." I did feel like I was pronouncing it incorrectly, but my mistake was that I never stopped for a minute to ask someone if my pronunciation was correct. It wasn't until the end of the semester that I finally realized it. He kindly corrected me and said, "It's not lǎoshǔ, it's lǎoshī," but didn't say much else. So, I had been calling my teacher a rat the whole time! After this experience,

I realized that my mistake was not only about pronunciation, but also about how easily meaning can change between cultures. A small difference in sound can completely transform what you are trying to say, creating confusion without you even noticing it.

I clearly remember Lin, she was my supervisor when I was working at an Indian restaurant for a few months near Da'an District in Taipei. I worked as a waitress, and sometimes I would go into the kitchen to wash dishes. I remember her as a strong yetsweet woman. I never asked her age, but I guessed she was in her fifties, with the energy of someone in their twenties. She is Taiwanese.

From the beginning, I remember feeling a bit intimidated by her. Even though Lin couldn't finish her university studies because she had to support her family, her English was amazing. She had taken some English courses in college. During my first week, my boss already knew that my Mandarin wasn't strong enough to communicate with customers, which meant that English would be my only tool. The kitchen staff were from India, and the other servers were from Indonesia and Myanmar.

Luckily, many customers assumed I was Indian, so they felt more comfortable talking to me and would even ask for me to serve them. I would always joke that, even if I wasn't Indian, maybe I should ask my parents what happened there, what they might be hiding.

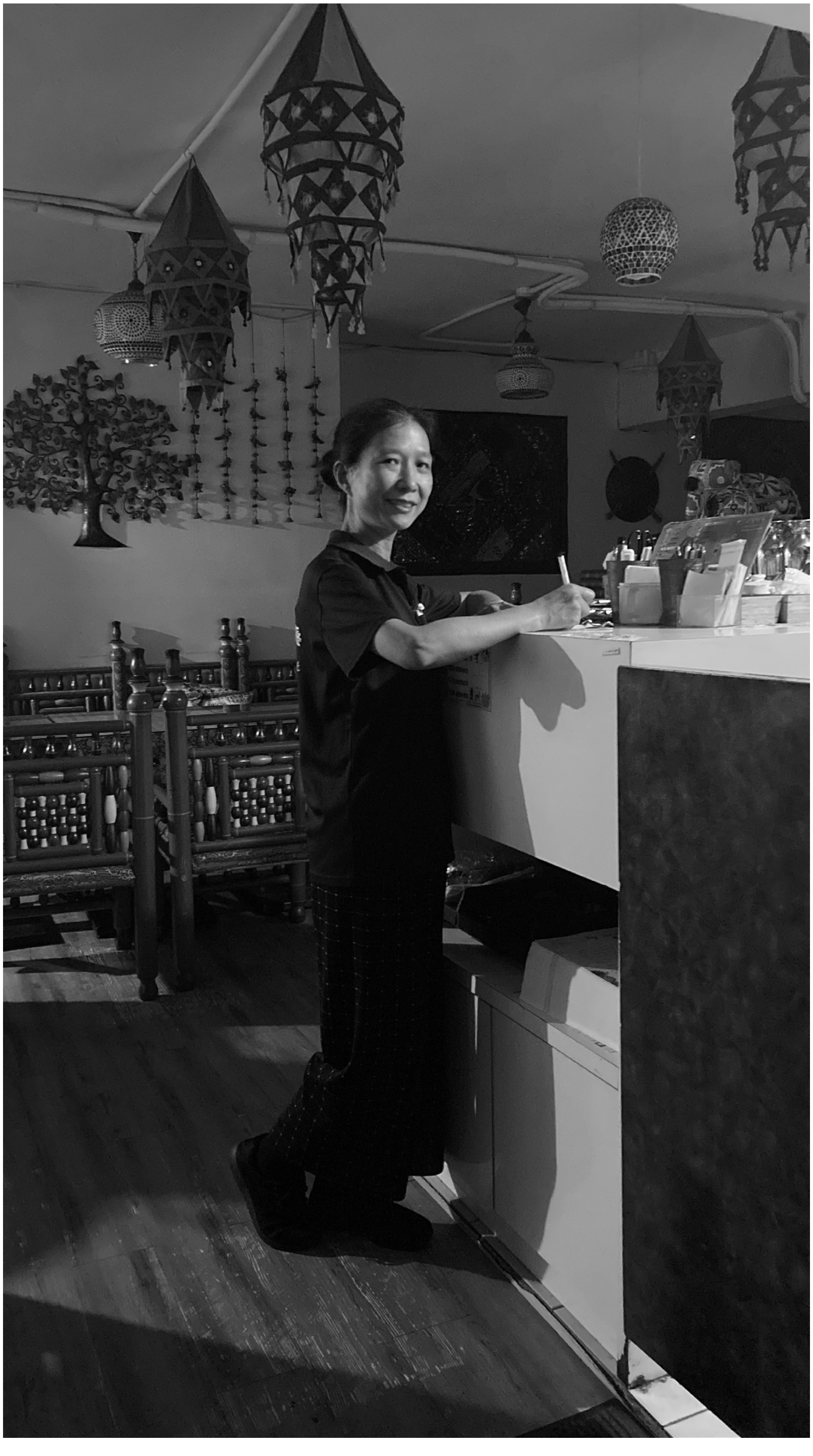
Lin was very patient, but I could clearly see her body language turning tense during peak hours. Still, there were moments when there were no customers, and she would teach me some basic phrases in Mandarin so I could use them at work. She never lost her patience with me. To overcome misunderstandings, we started exchanging simple phrases during our breaks, and that's how she taught me the processes I didn't fully understand. After a month of confusion and mistakes, everything finally began to flow more smoothly. From all the important phrases she taught me, the one that stuck in my brain was: Nǐ yào hē shuǐ ma? which literally translates as "Do you want some water?"—words I had to ask each table at least every five minutes.

I had doubled orders, sent food to the wrong tables, misunderstood requests, and even delivered the wrong order through Uber Eats. But eventually, communication became the key that allowed us to work together successfully.

After three months, I remember washing dishes in the kitchen and laughing with the chefs. Even though we didn't fully understand each other's languages, the little English they spoke was enough to share moments of joy.

I clearly remember a time when our boss's family was celebrating Ramadan, an Islamic period of fasting, prayer, and charity observed by Muslims. They were Pakistanis who had emigrated from Pakistan to India, and were now living in Taiwan, running an Indian restaurant. One day, they invited us to stay after work and join them for a Ramadan celebration. They explained their religion to us and shared why it is so meaningful to them. It became a special moment where everyone began sharing their own beliefs and traditions, including me.

Looking back, I realize that Lin and my coworkers became a living example of what it means to communicate across cultures. We came from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds, but through shared experiences, body language, and patience, we created our own way of understanding each other. Our small kitchen in Taipei became more than a workplace, it turned into a space of connection, learning, and mutual respect.



the beautiful Lin, July 30, 2024.

years after high school, Lin and her friends reunited.

chapter 7

a payday in taipei

This chapter studies how race, nationality, and appereance influence professional opportunities within Taiwan´s English teaching industry. Throughout the loupe of Critical Race Theory, it reflects how certain identities are privileged while others are questioned or excluded.

I still remember walking into my first interview to teach English in Taiwan. It was completely unexpected for me. The school was in an old building near Taipei Main Station. I had applied because a friend told me about the place and gave me the contact information of the person in charge. I dressed properly, since it was a job interview, and went up to the fourth floor. The moment I stepped onto the floor, a strong smell of cigarette smoke hit me. To me, the place felt almost underground, a bit shady. That's where I met the woman who was going to interview me.

The first thing she said, which I remember very clearly, was about my nationality. She assumed I was from India. "I'm from Guatemala," I corrected her. Then she frowned, raised her eyebrow, and replied, "I think we're going to have to lie and say you're American. After all, you come from America, right?" she insisted.

I hadn't realized how difficult it was going to be to deal with people lying or trying to hide my true nationality, pretending that I was from the United States, just so I could get a job. From that moment on, I began to understand how buxibans in Taiwan worked.

Buxibans are small private schools where children take extra lessons in subjects like science, Chinese, math, and English. They are often called cram schools in English. Classes usually last one to two hours, and you see the same students once or twice a week throughout the semester.

They usually take place after regular school hours and serve as extra support for students. A large number of children attend them, and they are a common part of the education system in Taiwan.

This experience made me reflect on how race, nationality, and appearance can shape opportunities, even when people don't openly talk about it. At that moment, when the interviewer insisted that I present myself as American, I realized how nationality can function almost like a kind of currency, not only in Taiwan's English teaching industry, but in many parts of Asia.

Thinking about this more deeply, I realized that these dynamics don't only affect people from America, but also many of my Asian friends. I remember how many of them wanted to become English teachers because the salary was above average. Three of them, in particular, experienced situations that clearly show how these invisible hierarchies still exist.

One of my friends, who comes from a Latin American country, was told by a potential employer that the host family "wasn't convinced" by her profile. She wasn't hired because of her Asian appearance. Another friend wanted to apply to a school just across from our dorm, and I went with her that day. She confidently walked in and asked about job openings, but the person in charge told her that the school only accepted "foreign" teachers. She left frustrated because, although she was a foreigner and her English was fluent, her Asian appearance and nationality automatically disqualified her.

A similar situation happened when two other friends joined me for an interview for a part-time English teaching job. We were all asked to give a demo class so the employercould assess our teaching ability and decide our salary. In the end, I was immediately offered the job, while they were told to wait for further notice. The reason was simple, they were both Asian. That's when I stopped and thought: this could easily be me back in Guatemala. If I applied for an English teaching job there, maybe no one would hire me either, just because I don't have blue eyes, blond hair, or come from the United States or Canada. Looks matter.

These experiences made me realize how deeply appearance can influence professional opportunities, even in a field that is supposed to be about language and communication. What may seem like simple preferences are often rooted in something much deeper.

Nowadays, I am still working as a part-time English teacher, and my boss, who I believe holds very strong biases such as my nationality, keeps reminding me to work on my pronunciation. But honestly, I don’t let it affect me the same way anymore. She knew my nationality when she hired me, so I don’t stress about it. I’ve also seen many teachers come and go from that cram school because of similar issues. It seems she has clear preferences about who she wants as teachers.

For me, I try not to let it affect me personally, but I do care about how inhuman it can feel. At the end of the day, we are people. We have feelings, and racism is not a way to treat employees.

coupang 酷澎
Xin Lin

teacher banana and her kids.

chapter 8

how my roommates changed me

This chapter analyze the dormitory as a ¨contact zone,¨ a space where cultures interact, negotiate, and coexist in everyday life. Over experiences with roomates from different countries, it reflexts on how intercultural relationships reshape assumptions, communication, and identity. Living together became a process of learning how difference can create connection rather than distance.

My room became a “contact zone,” a space where cultures meet, clash, and sometimes struggle, where different ways of living are constantly being understood and balanced. Every corner of that room carried a different world. Some days we collided, other days we blended, but in the end, our mix of cultures became its own quiet language of coexistence.

It was located on the 24th floor, the highest one, room 24H. My bed was next to a wall-sized window with a view of the Tamsui River in Sanchong District, New Taipei City. It was a space of 6.77 m by 4.57 m, with a bathroom that is surprisingly bigger than my own space, 1.59 m by 4.57 m. Each of us has a bed, and underneath it, our own study space along with a wardrobe. It’s quite a decent dorm compared to others in the country. Because it’s a Ming Chuan University dorm, each semester you may have different roommates. You might share a room with the same person for four years, or you might constantly meet new people. It depends who your roommates are going to be. From the very first day I arrived, I knew I would be living with one girl from Belize and another from Guatemala. The other two beds were a mystery. It was a dorm for five people. The nicest surprise was discovering that we would not only be roommates but also classmates, and, the same major. It felt comforting to live with them because we came from similar cultures. Two girls from Guatemala who understand each other completely, simply because we come from the same place. Belize is right next to our country, so it felt familiar, we share language, food, traditions. We are neighbors.

The three of us stayed together during the first two weeks, and then suddenly we met a new face, our roommate from South Korea. She was an exchange student learning Mandarin for one year. Honestly, I think I was the most excited because I had admired her country and culture for years.

I used to watch Korean dramas and listen to K-pop back home. She was the calmest roommate I’ve ever had. Her friends would often visit our room to gossip while eating snacks and drinking juice or makgeolli, a traditional rice drink with a sweet and slightly bitter taste from South Korea. They were all very sweet. I always tried to speak and practice my broken Korean with them. She stayed with us for two semesters and then left. As a gift, she left us her hairdryer, because we were always asking to borrow hers since we didn’t have one, a small but thoughtful gesture.

She left at the beginning of January 2023, returning to her country to finish her bachelor degree. Spring break has started which means beautiful sunny days. I used to do laundry and hang my clothes on the empty bunk beds. One day, I came back and found another new face. In my head, I was thinking, Is she Japanese or Korean? An Asian face that made me intrigued, she was wearing a mask so I couldn´t see her face completely, but her eyes only. Of course, my clothes were all over her space. I quickly started taking everything off and apologizing to her. What a welcome!

After she started unpacking, I was about to go out. I didn’t know whether to leave the door open for her or close it, so I asked her if she wanted me to leave the door open. “Igual nomás,” she replied. I froze, she spoke Spanish so well, but I couldn’t quite catchwhat she said. I felt intimidated by her Spanish, so I didn’t dare to ask her to repeat it. She was Paraguayan, naturally, I was abashed by the entire situation. And to this day, I still feel embarrassed for having made such a quick assumption based on her appearance. After a while, she told me she was half Japanese and half Brazilian. For me, it was fascinating how a person could have many nationalities and different roots.

From that day, I learned something new: never judge someone by how they look. The world is huge, but I still catch myself doing it sometimes. It made me realize how easily we place people into categories based on their appearance or language. I had already labeled her in my mind before even speaking to her. That small moment reminded me that identity goes far beyond first impressions.

During the summer of the same year, 2023. Our other roommate from Guatemala moved out. So it was just the girl from Belize, Paraguay, and me. Then, after I came back from Europe, where I had been visiting my older sister, I met yet another new face. Another roommate from Paraguay. She was very organized and quiet. She slept right across from my bed. Both of my Paraguayan roommates were studying Fashion Innovative Marketing.

A few months later, we knew another girl would take the fifth bed. But for some reason, she only came once to leave her things and didn’t return, which felt a bit strange. Later, she came back, our fifth roommate from Saint Kitts and Nevis, the second Caribbean girl in the dorm.

That was the last time someone new arrived. Since then, it has been the five of us: one girl from Belize, one from Saint Kitts and Nevis, two from Paraguay, and me. Somehow,we have managed to live and grow together. We get along well and know each other enough to keep choosing to share this space.

Even though each of us comes from a different background, we are patterns in crime.
They have made my life in Taiwan feel less lonely, a second home.

Yuki, Yinel, Leann, Caniqua & myself.

Sofia, Leann, Heejun & myself.

After living in Taiwan for four years, I understand it presents challenges that are not easy for everyone, like all places. One of the hardest ones is cultural shock, particularly the process of adapting to a new environment. As humans, we often feel fascinated when we first encounter a new place. However, alongside that fascination, there are also aspects that can be difficult to accept and adjust to.

For me, one of the most challenging aspects was the lack of physical contact. I come from a family culture where expressions of affection, such as hugs and kisses, are part of daily life. Arriving in Taiwan and realizing that this type of contact is not as common, was emotionally difficult. I misunderstood this difference and felt that my friends did not care about me, simply because they did not express affection in the same way. Nowadays, I came to understand that this was a cultural difference rather than a personal issue, and I gradually adapted to it. Another aspect that was difficult to adjust to was, climate, humidity. While it may seem like a minor detail, it is something that is hard to fully understand without experiencing it directly. The colder months are relatively short, lasting only from December to mid April, which made me appreciate that period even more.

In addition, a change of diet is a common challenge for many international students. In my case, the combination of sweet and savory flavors in Taiwanese cuisine was initially difficult to accept. I remember reacting strongly to unfamiliar smells and feeling resistant to the idea of adapting to these new flavours. However, over time, my palate adjusted, and what once felt unfamiliar gradually became part of my everyday experience. At the end, I chose to approach unfamiliar situations with an open mind and a willingness to adapt. By giving myself time and allowing space for adjustment, I was able to appreciate and respect a culture that is different from my own.

to be continued...

Taipei 101 and Sibia.

references

1. Pratt, M. L. (1991). Arts of the Contact Zone. Profession, 33–40. https://welcometotheleppy.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/marylouisepratt. pdf

2. Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. C. (1979). An integrative theory of intergroup conflict. In W. G. Austin & S. Worchel (Eds.), The social psychology of intergroup relations (pp. 33–47). Brooks/Cole. https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Jonathan_Turner4/publication/226768898_An_Integrative_Theory_of_Intergroup_Conflict/links/568b161508ae051f9afa8d50.pdf

3. Heidegger, M. (1962). Being and time. Harper & Row. https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/heidegger/

4. Delgado, R., & Stefancic, J. (2001). Critical race theory: An introduction. New York University Press. https://www.nyupress.org/9780814719385/critical-race-theory-an-introduction/

5. Ting-Toomey, S. (1993). Communicating across cultures. Guilford Press. https://psycnet.apa.org/record/1993-97912-000

6. Gudykunst, W. B., & Kim, Y. Y. (2003). Communicating with strangers: An approach to intercultural communication (4th ed.). McGraw-Hill.

7. Schinkel, W. (2020). Migration and the Normalization of the Migrant Other. Comparative Migration Studies, 8(1).* https://comparativemigrationstudies.springeropen.com/articles/10.1186/s40878-020-001 75-4

8. Fanari, A., & Segrin, C. (2023). Reentry shock and the role of communication in psychological health: A study of abrupt reentry during the COVID-19 pandemic. Journal of Intercultural Communication Research, 52(5), 493–512. https://doi.org/10.1080/17475759.2023.2239819